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SUBJECT: ROSALES ADVISOR: "WE'RE PULLING EVEN"

REF: CARACAS 003175

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Classified By: POLITICAL COUNSELOR ROBERT DOWNES,
REASON 1.4 (D)

¶1. (C) Summary. Angel Emiro Vera, close advisor to consensus opposition candidate Manuel Rosales, told the DCM October 24 that the Rosales campaign is gaining momentum and could defeat President Chavez in a free and fair election. The Rosales campaign is focused on trying to win the December 3 presidential election and has not yet developed a political strategy for dealing with potential defeat. At the same time, Vera and other opposition activists conceded that at this point the campaign can mount poll watching teams in only two-thirds of polling stations. Moreover, the campaign's get-out-the-vote phone tree is projected to reach less than one-third of the electorate. Interestingly, Vera reported that resident Cuban officials have approached the Rosales campaign to clarify what Rosales' policy would be toward the tens of thousands of Cubans participating in the BRV's social programs, should he win. Despite considerable electoral disadvantages, the Rosales campaign continues to make a credible and determined effort to upset Chavez at the polls. End Summary.

¶2. (SBU) DCM and Poloff met October 24 with key Rosales advisor Angel Emiro Vera (reftel) at a private breakfast hosted by former CNE Director and opposition activist Alberto Lopez Oliver. Vera and Oliver were joined by three other Rosales supporters: former Sucre Governor Ivan Esquerre Izaguirre, electoral conditions adviser Roberto Chang, and political broker Daniel Thimann.

Opposition Upbeat

¶3. (C) Angel Emiro Vera expressed confidence that the Rosales campaign is gaining ground with President Chavez' re-election campaign. Vera stressed that support for Rosales grows by as much as 12 percent in polls that allow respondents to register their preference confidentially. He said support for Rosales now exceeds 40% of registered voters and insisted that, given the margin of polling error, Rosales is "pulling even" with Chavez. Vera, Oliver, and Esquerre discounted other recent polls that gave Chavez a considerable lead. They said the "fear factor" skewed polling results in Chavez' favor and alleged that some local polling firms have been "bought" by the Chavez campaign.

14. (C) Vera said the Rosales campaign will continue to focus on issues, not electoral conditions. The Rosales camp believes the CNE will eventually announce the withdrawal of the controversial fingerprint (digital scanning) machines due to an inability to deploy a sufficient number to voting stations. Vera said the campaign believes the CNE has only 5000 fingerprint machines ready to go and will be in a position to cover only about 40% of polling stations by December 3. Asked about Rosales' October 23 public challenge to debate Chavez "anytime, anywhere," Vera said the Rosales camp did not expect Chavez to accept, but does hope to score political points as a result of Chavez' refusal.

Preparing for Election Day

15. (C) Vera reported that Rosales' campaign will work closely with electoral NGO Sumate to train party election observers. He said the Rosales campaign currently could cover only about two-thirds of all polling stations with campaign observation teams, each made up of three volunteers. The Rosales campaign's "One-to-Ten" voter mobilization program gives campaign volunteers responsibility for reaching out to at least ten registered voters. The goal of this Rosales phone tree is to engage at least 4.5 million registered voters (a little over 25% of the electorate) before December 3. So far, the phone tree has reached approximately 1.7 million voters.

16. (C) Asked about the campaign's relationship with the military, Vera replied that the Rosales campaign has no formal institutional contact with the armed forces, but does maintain informal contacts with military officials. Rosales will continue to issue public appeals to the military to "fulfill their constitutional duties" in ensuring that electoral results are respected. In addition, the Rosales

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campaign intends to send volunteers to polling stations to apply public pressure on election officials to render a transparent accounting of local results. The Rosales camp is also contracting polling firms to provide exit polling data on election day and plans to share that information with independent media.

17. (C) Oliver said the Rosales campaign is in close touch with the European Union regarding its prospective electoral observation mission (EOM) and aware of the CNE's efforts to try to impose unacceptable conditions on international observers. He and Esquerre expressed concern that international observers would be unable to detect sophisticated electronic fraud. Based on previous experience, the opposition has little confidence in the willingness of an OAS EOM to confront Chavez and mistrusts the Carter Center. Vera said the Rosales campaign is actively trying to recruit a few hundred volunteers from other Latin American countries, such as Mexico and Peru, to reinforce the Rosales campaign's observation efforts. Rosales will meet OAS SecGen in Caracas on October 26.

The Day After Election Day

18. (C) Vera and the other opposition activists made clear that they are still focusing on trying to win the presidential election. They scrupulously avoided the specter of defeat and did not raise any "Plan B" strategy for opposing Chavez. Vera noted that prior to running for president, Rosales had resisted the idea of trying to extend the political reach of his Un Nuevo Tiempo ("A New Time") party beyond his home state of Zulia. Noting that he retained good contacts among Chavistas from his previous experience in the National Assembly, Vera said he anticipated meeting with members of the Chavez campaign soon in an effort

to promote democratic "coexistence."

Cubans Hedging Their Bets

¶9. (C) Vera reported that unspecified Cuban government representatives have approached the Rosales campaign to ascertain what policy a Rosales government would put in place regarding the tens of thousands of Cubans working on Venezuelan social "missions" and in other government jobs. Vera said the Rosales campaign continues to debate internally how to handle these social "missions." On the stump, Rosales continues to say he would open these programs up to all eligible participants (not just Chavez supporters) as well as make them more effective. Vera said some Rosales campaign advisors believe that Rosales' tacit endorsement of Chavez' "misiones" is undermining Rosales' ability to project himself as a distinct alternative to Chavez. Oliver said that after a Rosales victory, many Cubans might wish to leave Venezuela. In that event, a Rosales government would be disposed to deal with the Cubans "democratically," including facilitating their voluntary resettlement to third countries.

Comment

¶10. (C) The Rosales campaign has gained political ground and for the first time is actually forcing President Chavez to react. Nevertheless, Venezuela's opposition still faces an extremely difficult challenge to convert its current political base into an actual electoral majority. Opposition bravado aside, we understand from other campaign sources that Rosales has tasked his advisors to put together scenario papers in the next two weeks that recommend strategies for dealing with many potential outcomes, including three defeat possibilities: a Chavez landslide, a narrow loss, a fraudulent Chavez victory. To encourage opposition voter turn-out, Rosales is wisely focusing his campaign on issues and deliberately downplaying electoral conditions that strongly favor Chavez. At some point, however, the Rosales campaign must try to address the very uneven electoral playing field on which they are competing (septel).

BROWNFIELD